



RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Divine deceit’ or the ‘devil’s delusion’? Gregory of Nazianzus on Christ’s defeat of the devil

Gabrielle Thomas 

Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA
Email: GRTHOMA@emory.edu

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Abstract

This essay considers Gregory of Nazianzus’ allusion to ‘divine deceit’, a motif related to the so-called ‘Christus Victor’ theory of atonement. This allusion is curious when we recall that for Gregory, the devil, not God, is the master of deception. When we treat *On the Lights* (Or. 39) as a literary unit – which commentators have yet to do – we see that Gregory makes several doctrinal affirmations before alluding to what is known as ‘divine deceit’. In this doctrinal discussion, Gregory draws upon the Platonic distinction between the orders of being and becoming as described in the *Timaeus*. He then alludes to ‘divine deceit’ with respect to the order of ‘becoming’, which bears the possibility of being misapprehended because it is ‘grasped by opinion’. The devil’s ‘opinion’ of himself and of Christ, therefore, is suspect. Death – or rather, Christ’s vanquishment of it – is the moment of reckoning. Since God alone can defeat death, Christ’s putting death to death is the only certain way for the devil to recognise that the ‘Son of Man’ is, after all, the ‘Son of God’. The ‘devil’s delusion’, then – not ‘divine deceit’ – best summarises Gregory’s understanding of this moment in the history of salvation.

Keywords: *Christus Victor*; devil; Gregory of Nazianzus; Jesus Christ; salvation

For since the one adept in evil [the devil] suspects himself to be unbeatable, having caught us by a bait with the hope of divinity, he was caught by a bait with the flesh thrown forward so that just as he struck Adam he fell in with God. And also the new Adam saved the old, and the condemnation of the flesh was abolished because death was put to death by flesh.

Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Lights*¹

Gregory of Nazianzus inherited a complex web of thought on the matter of salvation, which included Christ’s defeat of sin, flesh, death and the devil, not to mention how

¹*Theological Orations* [hereafter *Or.*] 39.13. For the Greek text, see *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 38–41*, vol. 358 of *Sources Chrétiennes* [hereafter *SC*], ed. Claudio Moreschini, trans. Paul Gally (Paris: Cerf, 1990), pp. 176–8. All translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

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the defeat of these enemies related to biblical language of ransom and sacrifice.² This essay focuses on Gregory's account of the devil as Christ's adversary and the apparent means through which Christ defeated the devil, namely, 'divine deception'.³ This description belongs to a nexus of thought on what is variously known as the 'fishhook', 'ransom' and 'Christus Victor' accounts of atonement.⁴ Simply put, Christ uses his mortal flesh as the bait through which to deceive the devil, who is subsequently hooked by divinity and caught like a fish. Gregory of Nazianzus has attracted fewer comments on this theme than his colleague, Gregory of Nyssa, who has 'remained uniquely confined to a kind of theological penalty box' because of his use of divine deceit.⁵ Whereas Gregory of Nyssa defends vociferously his use of the motif, Gregory of Nazianzus does not justify his apparent allusion to it in the passage from *On the Lights* quoted above, which is a curious omission on which this essay aims to elucidate.

I begin by considering recent scholarly approaches that indicate why the matter of divine deceit remains unresolved. After this, I will draw attention to pertinent features of deception in Plato's *Republic*. This text, along with its author, was hugely influential in the ancient Greek-speaking world and demonstrates how deception was conceived both positively and negatively, and at times, even promoted. I will then turn to biblical accounts of fish and fishing, along with Oppian's *Halieutica*, a second-century handbook that understands deception as necessary to catching fish. In addition to the biblical description of the devil as the 'father of lies' (John 8:44), Gregory draws on this text to show that deceit is work of the devil. And herein lies the conundrum: according to Gregory, truth belongs to God; and yet in *On the Lights* he seems to suggest that the devil is not the deceiver but the one deceived. This apparent contradiction is puzzling. If Gregory equates deception with the devil, then why does he not explain – even very briefly – divine deceit? To respond to this question, I will treat *On the Lights* as a literary unit. To the best of my knowledge, commentators have not yet pursued this route of enquiry. By making this move, we will see that Gregory outlines the doctrine of Trinity and the incarnation before alluding to divine deceit. During his doctrinal affirmations, Gregory draws upon the distinction between the orders of being and becoming as described in Plato's *Timaeus*. He then positions the devil's failure to recognise God, I will argue, with respect to the order of becoming, which bears the possibility of being

²Gregory of Nazianzus believes that the Father neither demands a ransom nor pays one to the devil but accepts the Son's sacrifice. See *On Holy Pascha*, Or. 45.22. For the Greek text, see J. P. Migne *Patrologia Graeca* [hereafter PG] 36.653A–C.

³Deception is one of many disputed aspects of Cappadocian accounts of salvation. For a comprehensive account of scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa's account of divine deceit see Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and [Post]modern* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 108–24. For an overview of the Cappadocians on salvation, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, 'The Cappadocians', in Justin S. Holcomb (ed.), *Christian Theologies of Salvation: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pp. 95–112.

⁴'Christus Victor' was coined by Gustaf Aulén who described it in the following terms: 'The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil.' *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1965), p. 20. For a concise summary and critique of this category, see Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 181–201. Khaled Anatolios, *Deification Through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 7–20, discusses the development of atonement theories since Aulén.

⁵Jeffrey Fisher and Kyle Kirchoff, '“Even the Enemy Himself Would Not Dispute That the Action Was Just”: Disguise and Self-Deception in Gregory of Nyssa', *The Heythrop Journal* 57/1 (2016), p. 84.

misapprehended because it is ‘grasped by opinion’ (*Tim.* 28a). Because the devil’s ‘opinion’ of himself and of Christ is already suspect, Gregory’s account is better described in terms of the ‘devil’s delusion’ than ‘divine deceit’.

Commentators on divine deceit

In what follows, two assumptions influence my interpretation of *On the Lights*. First, contemporary scholars such as Morwenna Ludlow, Andrew Louth, John Behr, Lewis Ayres, Anna Marmodoro, Volker Henning Drecoll and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz – to name but a few – have established beyond a doubt that Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, often known together as the ‘Cappadocians’, were well-schooled in Greek philosophical thought. Considering decades of excellent scholarship on how these three theologians integrated philosophy into their doctrinal debates, I assume that Gregory of Nazianzus did, in fact, grasp the theological implications of casting God in the role of the devil’s deceiver. Second, I do not speak of ‘theory’ with respect to Gregory’s thought. As John A. McGuckin has wryly observed, there really is no such thing as the ‘fishhook theory of atonement’ for theologians writing in the fourth century.⁶

While Gregory himself does not name his description as ‘divine deceit’, modern scholars have adopted this description without question. Gregory of Nyssa’s inclusion of the fishhook imagery in his account of salvation has been the focus of much debate, but Nazianzus’ use of it has attracted comparatively little attention. When discussed, the divine deceit motif is treated in connection with Gregory’s views on ransom.⁷ While Gregory’s writing does not lend itself easily to the treatment of ransom and divine deceit as a unified concept, scholars who adopt this approach are not without a rationale.⁸ Origen, for example, had considered these themes together a century earlier. And Gregory of Nyssa, writing shortly after Nazianzus, treats them similarly.⁹ Added to this, treating the two themes together alleviates the discomfort expressed by myriad commentators at the notion of God looking favourably on deception.¹⁰ Since Gregory of Nazianzus rejects explicitly the possibility of paying a ransom to the devil in *On Holy Pascha*, an oration written towards the end of his ministry, then the matter is settled: just as God did not pay a ransom to the devil nor did God deceive him.¹¹ Gregory, however, treats ransom and divine deceit apart from one another in different sermons and poems. Donald Winslow has recognised this and has argued that Christ’s

⁶John A. McGuckin, ‘St Gregory of Nyssa on the Dynamics of Salvation’, in John A. McGuckin (ed.), *Seeing the Glory Studies in Patristic Theology, Collected Studies of John A. McGuckin* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017), vol. 2, p. 223 n. 12.

⁷See, for example, the most recent attempt at examining this imagery, Ky Heinze, ‘The Devil’s Ransom and Christology in Origen and the Cappadocians’, *The Journal of Theological Studies* XX (September 2023), pp. 1–37. God’s deception of the devil is noted but not explored other than to affirm previous scholarship that considers it separately from the notion of ransom, at p. 27.

⁸Hugh E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: Mowbray, 1952), p. 58; Heinz Althaus, *Die Heilslehre des heiligen Gregor von Nazianz* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), p. 134.

⁹Origen’s *Commentary on Matthew* 16:8: ‘But to whom did Christ give his soul for ransom? Surely not to God. Could it then be to the Evil One? For he had us in his power until the ransom for us should be given to him, even the life of Christ. The Evil One had been deceived and led to suppose that he was capable of mastering the soul and did not see that to hold him involved a trial of strength greater than he could successfully undertake.’ Translation in Hugh E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., 1952), p. 5.

¹⁰Althaus, *Die Heilslehre*, p. 34; Turner, *Patristic Doctrine*, p. 58.

¹¹See note 2 above.

defeat of the devil is barely present in Gregory's thought, and that ransom is a major theme but that it does not include the devil.¹² It is not surprising, therefore, that Winslow does not probe divine deceit, since he considers the devil to be extraneous to Gregory's thought on atonement and on salvation more broadly.¹³

John Egan is the outlier amongst contemporary scholars. He holds a neutral position and does not draw a firm conclusion on whether ransom and deceit belong together but, unlike Winslow, believes that defeat of the devil forms a major thread in Gregory's vision of salvation.¹⁴ Since scholars have mostly focused on how divine deceit relates to ransom, it is not surprising that questions remain with respect to Gregory's allusion to divine deceit and why he does not justify it. With this in mind, let us turn to Plato, whose account in the *Republic* demonstrates that deception was not considered incontrovertibly to be harmful, but was conceived in highly nuanced ways. Most importantly, for this study, Plato claims that the gods do not lie, which is a position Gregory would have had to reckon with, along with the scriptural witness to God as "Truth".¹⁵

Qualifying deception

Permissible and necessary deception, for Plato, includes (a) the lies told to friends for the purpose of deterring those on the brink of committing some evil act because of insanity or foolishness, and (b) tales about antiquity where we cannot give an accurate account because we simply do not know what that account might be (*Rep.* 382c3–382d3). In addition to these occasions, certain situations demand that physicians and rulers might deceive patients and citizens for the sake of the polis (*Rep.* 389b2–389d5; 414b–15d). In sum, lies told under certain conditions promote justice. With respect to the gods, however, Plato's teaching includes no such provisions. Gods have no reason to lie because they are simple and true in both word and deed which, for Plato, includes the gods giving truthful accounts through word and image (*Rep.* 382e6–11). Commentators have observed that Plato's instruction on the gods' lack of deception generates a puzzle, because Plato also exhorts that humans should become like the gods as far as possible (*Rep.* 383c1–5).¹⁶ Baima and Paytas have shown that

¹²Donald F. Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), p. 107, cf. pp. 99–119 as a whole, where Winslow explores 'sacrifice' at length, demonstrating the important role it plays in Gregory's thought. Also see Chiara Somenzi, 'L'inganno "economico" di Dio al diavolo: da Origene ai Cappadoci', in Mario Girardi and Marcello Marin (eds), *Origene e l'alessandrino cappadocce (III–IV secolo)* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2002), p. 261.

¹³Unlike Althaus, Winslow, Egan and others, I am not attempting to demonstrate that Gregory prizes one view of atonement over another. Gregory weaves several strands of earlier Christian thought into his views on salvation and atonement; see Gabrielle Thomas, *The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), pp. 50–7.

¹⁴John P. Egan, 'The Deceit of the Devil According to Gregory Nazianzen', in *Studia Patristica* 22, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1989), p. 13. Some scholars overlook it altogether, including, for example, Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 115–52.

¹⁵*Or.* 29.16 (SC 250.210). See John 1:18, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.'

¹⁶John Hesk studies the representation of deceit and lies in classical Athens in his *Deception and Democracy in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000). For an analysis of the seemingly discordant views on lying in *Republic*, see Jane S. Zembaty, 'Plato's Republic and Greek Morality on Lying', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26/4 (October 1988), pp. 517–45. For an excellent literature review of all those who have discussed Plato's views on deception, see Nicholas R. Baima, 'Republic 382a–d: On the Dangers and Benefits of Falsehood', *Classical Philology* 112 (2017), pp. 1–19. For the Greek text, see Plato, *Republica*, ed. J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera* 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902).

the common response is to assume that gods do not lie because lying is immoral. However, when stating that the gods do not lie, Plato does not appeal to their moral life, nor does he argue that deceit is wrong. Instead, as Baima and Paytas have argued, the gods have no need to lie because they are self-sufficient.¹⁷ Gregory would have been familiar with this account of divine ‘non-deception’, which makes it curious that, unlike Gregory of Nyssa, he does not defend his use of fishhook imagery, which suggests that some kind of deception occurs, as we shall see next when considering the prevalence of fish in scripture and how, for late ancient Greek thinkers, fishing is intrinsically linked to deception, skill and warfare.

Fish and deception in scripture and Oppian’s *Haliutica*

Fish, sea monsters and serpents swim and creep through scripture, creating difficulties for humankind:

And will you catch a dragon (δράκων) with a fishhook
and put a halter around its nose? (Job 40:25, LXX).¹⁸

When, after listening to Job’s complaints, God asks Job whether he could ‘catch a dragon with a fishhook’, the question is rhetorical, of course. Human beings had already proved incapable of fulfilling the mandate laid out Gen 1:26, which was to rule over the creatures of the earth and sea:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind according to our image and according to our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heaven, and over the cattle and all the earth, and over all the reptiles that creep on the earth.’¹⁹

Where human beings have failed, however, God will not. Consequently, these sinister sea-creatures – whether Leviathan, Rahab or those who remain nameless – are no match for God:

O Lord God of hosts, who is like you?
You are powerful, O Lord, and your truth is around you.
It is you who rule the might of the sea,
and the surge of its waves you calm (Ps 88:9–10, LXX).²⁰

The Gospels also burst at the seams with allusions to God’s rule over the sea and its creatures in their accounts of Jesus. Jesus calms the storm (Matt 8:23–27), walks on

¹⁷Nicholas R. Baima and Tyler Paytas, ‘True in Word and Deed: Plato on the Impossibility of Divine Deception’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 58/2 (2020), p. 193.

¹⁸Translations are from New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) unless stated otherwise.

¹⁹My translation. For the Greek text, see *Septuaginta*, eds. Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, rev. edn. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), p. 2.

²⁰See also Isa 27:1; 51:9–10; Job 3:8–9; 7:12; 26:12–13; Pss 74:12–17; 87:4; 89:8–10; 104:25–26; Ezek 29:3–6. An overview of the connection between the devil and sea monsters can be found in Andy Angel, *Playing with Dragons* (Eugene, OR: Cascade 2014), pp. 1–52. For the development of these themes as they emerge beyond the New Testament, see Nicolas K. Kiessling, ‘Antecedents of the Medieval Dragon in Sacred History’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89/2 (1970), pp. 167–77.

water (Matt 14:23), multiplies fish (Matt 14:13–21), knows where the fish swim (John 21:6–8), pays his taxes with a coin found in the mouth of a fish (Matt 17:23–27), tells his disciples he will make them fishers of human beings (Matt 4:19). Moreover, the resurrected Jesus eats fish (Luke 24:26–42), and his death is likened to Jonah’s experience of being caught in the sea monster (κῆτος), ‘For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth’ (Matt 12:39–40). In addition to the theological significance of Matthew’s adaption of Jonah with respect to Christ, the passage communicates the unhappy relationship between human beings and the sea creatures they were called to rule.

When we look at late ancient Greco-Roman culture, we find that fish are as inherently wily and deceptive as the sea monsters are strong. Because of this, fishing was a very serious business. In her analysis of Oppian’s *Halieutica*, Emily Kneebone observes, ‘Fishing often served as a metaphor for power relations at large’ and is ‘a game of strategy, patience, craft, and deception’.²¹ Furthermore,

Fishing is an act of domination, an imposition of one being’s will on another, and a reminder of the superior mental or physical capacities of the victor; it also marks out the limits of mankind’s control over the natural world. This is a sphere in which a single error can mean death, at times for the fisherman as well as the fish, and it maps with almost startling ease onto the domains of politics and military conflict.²²

At the end of the second century, Oppian explored in didactic verse everything someone in the twenty-first century could ever want to know about fish and fishing in the ancient Greek-speaking world. Exerting a strong influence on Gregory of Nazianzus (as we shall see shortly), Oppian’s five-book ‘fishing manual’ deals with themes ranging from the vastness of the sea, the power of the gods and – particularly pertinent to this study – the deceptiveness of sea creatures and the kinds of bait needed for wily fish. Oppian’s work even includes a detailed exposition of what kind of character is needed for the person who wants to excel at catching fish: ‘Cunning in wit too and wise should the fisher be, since many and varied are the devices that fishes contrive, when they chance upon unthought-of snares’ (*Hal.* 3.41–43). Oppian closes with instruction on how to catch sea monsters, the well-known biblical foe. His instruction on the sea monsters held wide and lasting appeal because, as Kneebone observes, ‘This κῆτος functions, in other words, as both a “real” (albeit terrifying) fish and a monstrous mythical prototype, a model for the cohabitation of myth and science, factual plausibility as well as cosmic scope.’²³ Fish and those who catch them held a prominent space in myth, military life and culture.²⁴

²¹Emily Kneebone, *Oppian’s Halieutica: Charting a Didactic Epic* (Cambridge: CUP, 2020). For the Greek text and an English translation (used above), see Alexander William Mair, *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus*. Loeb Classical Library No. 219 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928). Fishermen are hunters known for their cunning; see Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 28–34, 41–6.

²²Kneebone, *Oppian’s Halieutica*, p. 4.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 387.

²⁴Everett L. Wheeler, *Stratagem and the Vocabulary of Military Trickery* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 25–39; see p. 31: ‘Like *dolos*, *apate* denotes a “trap,” but its connotation places more emphasis on the lying and ambiguity which prepare the trap.’

Let me recap our journey thus far. I began by identifying a curious feature in *On the Lights*, namely, if Gregory equates deception with the devil, then why does he not justify – even very briefly – his allusion to divine deceit? After establishing the scholarly lack of attention to this puzzle, we explored Plato’s account of deception, noting that while he affirms certain kinds of deception amongst humans, the gods are not deceptive: they are self-sufficient and have no need of deceit. Next, I turned to biblical and Greco-Roman accounts of fish and fishing, noting how these connect to themes of warfare, victory and deception. As we move to explore Gregory’s account of the devil’s deceptions, we will see these ideas at play. Like Oppian, Gregory moved between myth and science, albeit the principal difference between these two authors was that Gregory aimed to provide a theological account of the devil’s actions and how followers of Christ might resist him.

Diabolical deceit

Gregory of Nazianzus was in no doubt that deception is the devil’s preferred craft, hence his description of the devil as the ‘wily one’ (δολόμεντος).²⁵ The devil appears in an array of Gregory’s orations and poems, often as the one who deceives humankind with the aim of preventing salvation. Consequently, when introducing or speaking of the devil, it is common for Gregory to mention the history of salvation and the devil’s role in the fall of humankind. On the Sunday after Easter, for example, Gregory rehearses Genesis 1–3, observing ‘by the envy of the Evil One, death came into the world and took humankind captive by deceit’.²⁶ In addition to referencing the fall to depict the devil’s identity as ‘the deceiver’, Gregory utilises the ancient philosophical conceptualisation of fishing as a deceptive enterprise. This image is captured most vividly in a poem in which Gregory describes his own ongoing struggles with the devil. Crying out to ‘Lord Christ’, Gregory seeks deliverance from the devil who is the ‘ruler of the world’ (κόσμου μεδεόν):

He weaves ruin for human beings just like copper beneath food, whenever it brings death to fish (ὄτ’ ἰχθύσι κήρα φέρησιν). Desiring life, they drag unforeseen destruction into their stomachs as they swallow their own doom. In just this way, the wily one (δολόμεντος), although I knew that he is nether darkness (ἐπεὶ ζόφον ὄντα μιν ἔγνω), clothed himself in beautiful skin and came to me like a man, in case I, desiring good, might in some way approach evil, and my mind, easily swayed, might be snatched away to destruction.²⁷

²⁵*Carmen* [hereafter *Carm.*] 2.1.55 (PG 37.1399, 8). For the prevalence of the devil in Gregory’s thought. See Thomas, *Image of God*, pp. 29–34, 110–17; and Dayna Kalleres, ‘Demons and Divine Illumination: A Consideration of Eight Prayers by Gregory of Nazianzus’, *Vigilae Christianae* 61/2 (2007), pp. 157–88.

²⁶*Or.* 44.4 (PG 36.609D–612B). While this oration has been dated as late as 383, Daley rightly suggests 379; see Brian Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), pp. 154–5. Also see *Carm.* 1.1.7 (PG 37.444–5, 73–82); *Carm.* 1.2.1 (PG 37.556, 457); *Carm.* 2.1.60 (PG 37.1403, 1); *Or.* 24.15 (SC 284.74).

²⁷*Carm.* 2.1.1 (PG 37.974, 55–62). Translation adapted from Peter A. O’Connell, ‘Homer and His Legacy in Gregory of Nazianzus’ “On His Own Affairs”’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 139 (2019), pp. 150–5. O’Connell demonstrates how Gregory of Nazianzus imitates Homer and imitates Oppian imitating Homer in *Carm.* 2.1.1. O’Connell suggests that the poem in question reverses Gregory’s use of the fishnet as an image of salvation. While I am unconvinced by O’Connell’s conclusion that the fishnet is ‘a central image of salvation for Gregory’ (p. 150), his analysis of Gregory’s use of Homer and Oppian is excellent. For an English translation of the poem, see Denis M. Meehan, *Three Poems* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987). For further comment on Gregory’s use of Homer, see Christos

Here and throughout his work, Gregory portrays the devil as one who 'is actually darkness (ὄντως σκότος ἐστὶ), although he feigns light'. When the devil no longer has the strength for open warfare, 'he plots in secret and becomes an "honest" adviser, although he is really evil'.²⁸ Just like the fisherman supplying bait to the unsuspecting fish, the devil offers that which appears beneficial to humankind. In light of this characteristic behaviour, Gregory urges his readers to be on their guard against the devil, who will take every opportunity to 'hook' them in the same way that he tries to ensnare Gregory. As Christos Simelidis, Peter O'Connell and others have shown, Gregory would have anticipated his readers' knowledge of earlier poets such as Homer and Oppian, who wrote in conceptually comparable ways. Like the gods of Homer, the devil is not recognisable until after he has left, rendering his deception very dangerous. Like Oppian's great fish who hurtles to his doom at the sight of shrimp on the copper hook, human beings must exercise caution against the devil who is like the wily Hermes catching fish (*Hal.* 4.227–29).²⁹

As the one who deceived Adam and Eve at their first appearance on the earth, the devil serves as an excellent example of what deception looks like in practice and its end goal, namely, death. Given Gregory's clarity on this matter, then, why does he utilise divine deceit with such apparent ease? Let us, next, turn to *On the Lights* (*Or.* 39), an oration remembering the baptism of Christ that Gregory most likely preached during Epiphany, 381.³⁰

On the Lights

On the Lights is concerned with 'my Jesus' (39.1; SC 358.150). To speak of Jesus, Gregory explains, is to speak of a 'mystery' (μυστήριον). Gregory qualifies this opening line by affirming that any mystery concerned with Jesus is not like those that belong to the Greeks. As Grillmeier has argued, 'the mysteries of Christ remains essential for the Church. It was most stressed and preserved in preaching and the liturgy. New emphases came from theological reflection (elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the mysticism of God and Trinity that followed from it).'³¹ Since Gregory has identified Jesus as the focus of this 'mystery', his audience should expect to learn something of the person of Jesus Christ. Further to this, Gregory emphasises that the mystery of Jesus is 'neither deceitful nor disorderly' (οὐκ ἀπατηλὸν οὐδ' ἄκοσμον) but 'exalted and divine' (39.1; SC 358.150). Note, Gregory begins by declaring that this mystery

Simelidis, *Selected Poems of Gregory of Nazianzus: I.2.17; II.1.10, 19, 32: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

²⁸*Or.* 40.16 (SC 358.230).

²⁹Likewise, Gregory would have expected readers to be familiar with Belial of the Septuagint and New Testament. Later in 'On His Own Affairs', Gregory speaks of the devil as both serpent (δρακόν) and Belial (*Carm.* 1.2.1; PG 27.996, 343–5), two names which further connect to deception, since Belial is a name for Satan widely used in extra-biblical literature, where the name is given to a figure who is important as a deceiver; see S. David Sperling, 'Belial', in Karel Van Der Toorn, Bob Beckling, and Pieter W. Van Der Horst (eds), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 170. It is also found in the form 'Beliar', which occurs only once in the New Testament (2 Cor 6:15).

³⁰For a discussion on dating see SC 358.16–22. Moerschini concludes with Bernardi that the most likely dates for *On the Theophany* (*Or.* 38) and *On the Lights* (*Or.* 39) are Christmas 380 and Epiphany 381, respectively; see also Jean Bernardi, *La Prédication des pères cappadociens* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 206.

³¹Alois Grillmeier, S.J., 'Geschichtlicher Überblick über die Mysterien Jesu im allgemeinen', in Alois Grillmeier, S.J. (ed.), *Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1969), vol. 3.2, p. 7.

of which he speaks is not, in fact, deceptive. As observed above, in spite of Gregory's deliberate qualification, the apparent allusion in the thirteenth section of the oration, quoted at the beginning of this article, has resulted in scholars referring to Gregory's account of divine deceit.

After explaining the purpose of his sermon (viz., to remember the holy day of lights on which Christ, the true light, was baptised), Gregory exhorts his audience to 'receive once again the first Adam', offering reassurance that while the light is persecuted by the darkness, the light is not overcome (39.2; SC 358.152). Assuming that not everyone will understand what he means by the 'darkness' (σκότος), Gregory explains that he has in mind the 'the adverse power' (τῆς ἀντικειμένης λέγω δυνάμεως) who 'from audacity (ἐξ ἀναιδείας) leapt upon the visible Adam but fell upon God and was defeated' (39.2; SC 358.152).³² This defeat was that 'we' might become 'children of perfect light', in response to which Gregory closes his introduction as he began, asking, 'do you see the power of the mystery?' (ὁρᾶτε τοῦ μυστηρίου τὴν δύναμιν) (39.2; SC 358.152). At the very beginning of the oration, we learn that the devil attacked Christ from a place of audacity (ἀναίδεια), a term that occurs just six times through Gregory's corpus.³³ The history of the term does not suggest that because of being audacious the devil would be unable to recognise God. From Gregory's description of Christ as the 'visible Adam', at this point in the oration it seems that divinity's invisibility leaves the devil in a position of being unable to recognise God. Gregory makes no further comment but moves swiftly on, discussing various pagan rites of initiation, all of which he disapproves. He then offers a brief account of the fall of humankind, exhorting his audience to get themselves ready for salvation (39.7; SC 358.160–2). Once again, Gregory speaks of 'the wisdom of God hidden in a mystery' (39.10; SC 358.168) before beginning to 'remember God' since this 'is the principal purpose of the gathering' (39.11, SC 358.170).

Immediately prior to the oft-cited text concerning divine deceit, Gregory includes an account of the doctrine of God which, while concise, is a little too lengthy to repeat in full here. In sum, he is keen to avoid 'the contraction of Sabellius' and the 'division of Arius', preferring to speak of three hypostases (τρία ὑποστάσεις) or persons (πρόσωπα) who are 'divided undividedly' and one 'Being (οὐσία) that is divinity (θεότης)' (39.11, SC 358.172). Gregory then proclaims, there is 'one God (εἷς θεός)' and 'one Lord, Jesus Christ through whom are all things' (καὶ εἷς Κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς, δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα; 1 Cor 8:6), after which he considers how the Father, Son and Spirit relate to one another (39.12, SC 358.172–6). With his doctrine of God delineated, Gregory turns back to the history of salvation. Human beings were created to worship this glorious God, but through the 'envy of the devil and the bitter taste of sin', God's human image is separated from her Creator; but it is not God's way to leave human beings in this sad state of affairs. Beginning with a rhetorical question, Gregory then considers the incarnation as the great mystery through which God becomes human:

³²On Christ as the divine warrior in Cappadocian thought, see Dragoş A. Giulea, *Pre-Nicene Christology in Paschal Contexts: The Case of the Divine Noetic Anthropos* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 159; Philippe Molac, "A-t-il commis une faute en étant pour toi miséricordieux? Pour moi, c'est très admirable!" la Christologie dans le deuxième poème dogmatique de Grégoire de Nazianze', *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 109/4 (2008), p. 312.

³³Gregory mostly uses 'audacity' to describe human beings; see *Or.* 2.79 (SC 247.192); *Or.* 26 (PG 35.1232); *Carm.* 1.2.29 (PG 37.899, 904) and only once with respect to the devil (above). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus applies it to servants who have dishonoured him (*Od.* 22. 424); likewise, Plato uses it to describe those without shame (*Phaedrus* 254d).

What happens? And what is the great mystery concerning us? Natures undergo an innovation and God becomes human (καινοτομοῦνται φύσεις, καὶ θεὸς ἄνθρωπος γίνεται)... the Son of God accepts also to become (γενέσθαι) the Son of Man and to be called such; not changing what he was – for he is immutable – but assuming what he was not – for he is philanthropic, that the ungraspable might be grasped, being in company with us through the mediation of the flesh, as if through a veil, since it is impossible for his untainted divinity to be borne by a nature subject to generation and corruption. This is why unmingled realities are mingled, not only God with that which is coming into being (οὐ γενέσει μόνον Θεός), not only intellect with flesh, not only atemporal with time, not only the unlimited with measure, but also procreation with virginity, and dishonour with that which is above every honour, and suffering with the impassable, the immortal with that which is corruptible (39.13; SC 358.176–8).

As a highly skilled author, Gregory ordered these doctrinal proclamations intentionally. Note, he positions his account of the incarnation immediately after affirmations of trinitarian doctrine and before alluding to divine deceit. Consider the language Gregory has used thus far. Concepts such as ‘being’ (οὐσία) describe the doctrine of God (as much as this is possible), and, as one might expect, Gregory sums up the incarnation with phrases such as ‘God becomes human’ (θεὸς ἄνθρωπος γίνεται). Added to this, Gregory contextualises his account by referring – for the eleventh time thus far in this oration – to ‘mystery’, asking, ‘And what is the great mystery concerning us?’ Before we come to the section in which the devil does not recognise God, let us consider how Gregory has prepared the way for his claim. Terms such as ‘being’ (οὐσία) – as those familiar with Greek philosophy would have known – are wholly distinct from that which is ‘becoming’. For one of the best-known delineations of this distinction, let us turn to Plato’s *Timaeus*, after which we will be in a better position to assess Gregory’s supposed account of divine deceit.

As John Behr has established in his most recent study on Gregory of Nyssa’s account of the creation of humankind, ‘Plato’s *Timaeus* was the most important text in the ancient world, and beyond’, on matters such as the structure of the cosmos.³⁴ While interpretations of *Timaeus* are hotly debated with respect to the status of the Demiurge, the account of time and many other concerns, I am interested in the distinction between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ drawn in the work’s prelude.³⁵ *Timaeus* begins by outlining the metaphysical structure for his account to provide a rationale for its status as ‘a likely story’ (*Tim.* 29b–c).³⁶ During this prelude, *Timaeus* distinguishes between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. He asks, ‘What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which becomes and never is (τί τὸ ὄν ἀεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε)?’³⁷ *Timaeus* then expands on this

³⁴John Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2023), p. 40.

³⁵For an early study on Gregory’s use of Plato, see Henri Pinault, *Le Platonisme de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze: Essai sur les relations du Christianisme et de l’Hellénisme dans son oeuvre théologique* (La Roche-sur-Yon: G. Romain, 1925). For contested readings of Plato, see Julia Annas and Christopher J. Rowe (eds), *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Also, see Frances MacDonald Cornford, *Plato’s Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997 [1937]).

³⁶Plato, *Timaeus* 27d–28a. Also see *Symposium* 210e–211b; *Theaetetus* 152d–153e; *Sophist* 248a–249d.

³⁷I have used Zeyl’s translation for its lucidity and have modified it in a few places. He omits the second ἀεί on the basis that it is poorly attested, a move that I have followed; see *Plato: Timaeus*, trans. Donald

distinction, at the same time demonstrating that ontology and epistemology go hand-in-hand, ‘The former is grasped by understanding, which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion (δόξα), which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away but never really is’ (*Tim.* 28a). As Johansen summarises: ‘Being is that which is graspable by intelligence with an account (*logos*); becoming that which is graspable by opinion (*doxa*) with unreasoning (*alogos*) perception.’³⁸ Furthermore, that which belongs to the order of ‘being’ is not subject to change but that which is ‘becoming’ is subject to change and corruption. A little later, Timaeus states, ‘As being is to becoming, so is truth to belief (ὄ τι περὶ πρὸς γένεσιν οὐσία, τοῦτο πρὸς πίστιν ἀλήθεια)’ (*Tim.* 29c). That which is ‘becoming’ bears the possibility of being misinterpreted because it is ‘grasped by opinion’ and therefore remains subject to scrutiny.³⁹ Put another way, ‘becoming’ does not lend itself naturally to certitude.

If we consider Timaeus’ distinction together with Gregory’s doctrinal assertions in the section above, we learn something very important about how Gregory understands Christ’s existence, which, in turn, informs how we might interpret Gregory’s account of the devil’s inability to recognise God. As noted above, Gregory affirms that there is one ‘being (οὐσία), that is divinity (θεότης)’. In ‘being’ Christ is, as Gregory puts it, ‘God’, ‘intellect’, ‘atemporal’, ‘unlimited’, ‘impassable’ and ‘immortal’ (39.12, SC 358.172–4). When, however, ‘the Son of God accepts also to become (γενέσθαι) the Son of Man and to be called such’, he steps into ‘that which is coming into being’, ‘flesh’, ‘time’, ‘measure’, ‘suffering’ and ‘corruptibility’. Christ ‘becomes’ human, and by ‘becoming’ human Christ enters an order of existence where the Son of God exists ‘as if through a veil’ (39.13; SC 358.176–8).⁴⁰ As noted, ‘becoming’ does not lend itself naturally to certitude, and if we take into account the language that Gregory has used leading up to his use of the fishhook imagery, his account reads not as ‘divine deceit’, but something more like the ‘devil’s delusion’. Gregory has prepared the way so that the expected result of the encounter between the devil and God will be one in which the devil does not identify correctly the God who has ‘become’ human:

For since the one adept in evil [the devil] suspects himself to be unbeatable (ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ᾤετο ἀήττος εἶναι τῆς κακίας ὁ σοφιστής), having caught us by

J. Zeyl (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000), p. 13. I also consulted Frances MacDonald Cornford, *Plato: Timaeus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987). For the Greek text, see Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera 4* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902).

³⁸Thomas K. Johansen, ‘The Timaeus on the Principles of Cosmology’, in Gail Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* (New York: OUP, 2019), p. 290. For discussion on 28a3 of ‘coming-into-being’ as ‘coming-into-existence’, see Michael Frede, ‘Being and Becoming in Plato’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume (1988), pp. 37–52; A. Code, ‘Reply to Michael Frede’s “Being and Becoming in Plato”’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume (1988), pp. 53–60.

³⁹The distinction between being and becoming is employed by first-century philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch; see Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *The Divine Heartset* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), forthcoming. I am indebted to Dr. Fletcher-Louis for sharing his book before publication, since his argument for Paul’s use of *Timaeus* has been invaluable to this study. For Philo’s acceptance of the Platonic dichotomy between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, with a debt to the language of the LXX, see David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the ‘Timaeus’ of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 92–103.

⁴⁰Gregory applies this sequence across his corpus. In *On the Theophany*, which he preached just a week before preaching *On the Lights*, Gregory proclaims: ‘On the one hand God is and is eternally from the eternal Being, above cause and principle, for there was no principle higher than the Principle. On the other hand, later he comes into being (γενόμενος) for us...’ *Or.* 38.3 (SC 358.108).

a bait with the hope of divinity (θεότητος ἐλπίδι δελεάσας ἡμᾶς), he was caught by a bait with the flesh thrown forward so that just as he struck Adam he fell in with God (σαρκὸς προβλήματι δελεάζεται, ἴν', ὡς τῷ Ἀδὰμ προσβαλὼν τῷ θεῷ περιπέσῃ). And, also the new Adam saved the old and the condemnation of the flesh was abolished because death was put to death by flesh (39.13; SC 358, 176–8).

Gregory's use of language in this section is ingenious when read in conversation with that all has gone before in this oration. By employing the imagery of the fishhook, so familiar in his day, Gregory conjures up a strong vision of Christ's defeat of the devil. At the same time, he employs the Platonic distinction, which is also very well-known. The devil, in this section, is not presented in a position of certitude. He only 'suspects' that he is unbeatable. His 'opinion' of himself and of Christ has been discerned through, to use Plato's language, 'unreasoning perception' and, as such, is subject to scrutiny. By making this move, Gregory effectively removes God from accusations of deception.

Gregory makes one final, essential step as he pronounces Christ's defeat of devil, 'And, also the new Adam saved the old and the condemnation of the flesh was abolished because death was put to death by flesh' (39.13; SC 358.178). Just as a fish would not consider too closely the bait it is offered, the devil does not pause to consider the human being before him, but even if he did, it is highly unlikely he could be certain of what he discerned prior to Christ's death. Death – or rather, Christ's vanquishment if it – is the only sure and certain event through which the devil might recognise that the Son of Man is, after all, the Son of God. What the devil needed to do was to wait for just three more days and all would have been 'revealed'.

Conclusion

This essay has considered Gregory of Nazianzus' allusion to 'divine deceit', a theme related to the so-called 'Christus Victor' theory of atonement. Gregory's careful crafting of *On the Lights* and the positioning of Christ's defeat of the devil is evident only when we read this oration in its entirety, as it would have been heard and read in Gregory's day. Gregory emphasises from the start of the oration that the mystery of Jesus is 'neither deceitful nor disorderly' (οὐκ ἀπατηλὸν οὐδ' ἄκοσμον) but 'exalted and divine' (39.1; SC 358.150). He makes this claim only once and uses few words to do it, but to miss them is to miss the clues that follow.

Through drawing attention to the positioning of his doctrinal account in *On the Lights*, I have demonstrated how Gregory draws upon the Platonic distinction between the orders of being and becoming as described in the *Timaeus*. When he turns to proclaim Christ's defeat of the devil – which includes the section seemingly portraying 'divine deceit' – Gregory does so by positioning the devil's inability to recognise God in terms of the order of 'becoming', which bears the possibility of being misapprehended because it is 'grasped by opinion'. No certitude exists in 'becoming'. The devil's 'opinion' of himself and of Christ, therefore, is open to interrogation. It is but a delusion. According to Gregory, death – or rather, Christ's defeat of it – is the moment of reckoning. Since God alone can beat death, Christ's putting death to death is the only way that the devil could have been certain that in meeting the new Adam, he also met God. Undoubtedly, Gregory utilises all the imagery relating to fish, fishing and warfare at hand to suggest that the devil is, indeed, duped. However, like Basil before him,

Gregory would not have considered divine deceit necessary to his account of salvation. By positioning the devil's lack of recognition of God in the order of 'becoming', it is far more likely that if Gregory had been coining his own pithy title of this moment in the history of salvation, he would have named it not 'divine deceit' but the 'devil's delusion'.

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